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Grow Your Practice from the Inside Out

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Physicians grow their practices one step at a time. From the day they start a new practice or join an existing one, they seek ways to create a solid patient base. Growing a practice often involves a blend of marketing, public relations, and networking support from colleagues. In reality, what happens once patients arrive in the physician's office is often what matters the most. Here are my secrets to growing your practice from the inside out.

TREASURE NEW PATIENTS

When it comes to new patients, it's not just a matter of getting the facts and getting on with the show. Sure, you need to register the patient in your practice management system, and it's important to get a health history. But when you have a sign-in sheet or the first question is "What type of insurance do you have?" it seems more like guarding the door than holding out the welcome mat. When a potential new patient inquires about the practice, begin the conversation by giving your name and thanking the patient for calling. Just as importantly, end the conversation by asking her if there is anything else you can do for her. Once a new patient arrives at the office, welcome him to the practice before you start collecting demographics, and by all means get rid of the sign-in sheet—a sign-in sheet is an excuse to ignore the patient's arrival.

MAKE SELF-INTRODUCTIONS A PRIORITY

I pay close attention to all aspects of the patient encounter when I arrive for an appointment as a mystery shopper. It amazes me that more than 90% of the time the doctor is the only one to shake my hand and make an introduction. Why is it that the nurse or receptionist treats me as if I'm just one more patient on the schedule? Patients form a large part of their opinion about a practice based on their first impressions—the initial encounter. Patients deserve to know a staff member's name, whether it's the receptionist, nurse, or another employee. It goes a long way toward making the patient feel a part of your practice and getting a sense that you really care about her. It's easy enough to identify a new patient on the schedule or on the chart, and it only takes a minute to smile and say "Hi Mrs. Nice, my name is Tracy. Thank you for joining Best Care Practice." When self-introductions become a priority for everyone in the office, you raise the bar on customer service. Your patients will quickly become your ally and promote the practice to their peers.

PAY ATTENTION TO THE AMBIENCE

Ambience is defined as an environment's distinct atmosphere nd surroundings. Make sure your office makes a positive statement. Take a critical look at the yfurnishings in the office, and ask yourself if they represent how you value yourself, the staff, and the patients. The furnishings need to be attractive and should be updated as often as your home furnishings, which is probably around every 7 to 10 years. Your office waiting area should have the feel and look of a comfortable living room with adequate seating, good lighting, and a broad array of current reading materials. Does your practice pass this test? Keep the rest of the office furnishings updated as well. This includes the business office, clinical space, business and clinical equipment, and the staff lounge. When a patient sees a computer, telephone system, exam table, or diagnostic equipment that looks 10 years old, he is bound to question whether you are giving the same attention to updating your clinical skills.

MAKE TECHNOLOGY YOUR NEW BEST FRIEND

Check out the latest customer service and patient communication systems that are on the market. A good recall system keeps patients coming in for recommended follow-up care. More sophisticated systems can notify patients of emergency cancellations, an available appointment, or a new service or physician that is now on board.

SET CUSTOMER SERVICE PERFORMANCE STANDARDS

It is important for each position in the office to have at least one performance indicator that is tied to customer service. The receptionist indicators might be to introduce herself to every new patient and to assist all patients within 60 seconds of their arrival. The scheduler may have an indicator for not leaving patients in the queue more than 30 seconds and to end each telephone or live encounter with “Do you have any other questions today?” Once you have the performance standards in place, include them in the positions’ written job descriptions. Then apply the standards to the employees’ performance review, and monitor their compliance on an ongoing basis. Many practices go one step further by implementing a bonus system that rewards employees on dedication to patient service. It can be as simple as selecting the star performer of the month and giving that staffer movie tickets or a restaurant gift card, to a Friday off or a monetary award.

BUILD A CUSTOMER SERVICE CULTURE

The employees’ customer service attitude will be based on how you treat each one of them. Don’t be the physician or manager that walks in the back door and fails to say good morning to each person that serves you. Remember to thank employees when they go the extra mile, and ask how they feel when returning to work after an illness. Honor your patients and value their time by getting to the office before the first patient arrives and doing your best to stay on schedule. If you run more than 15 minutes late on a regular basis, you need to analyze the reasons this is occurring and take corrective actions as soon as possible. Always treat your patients with kindness, and speak about them respectfully to the staff. Your staff will model your behavior. So if the patients aren’t happy, it may be time to look in the mirror.

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5 steps to improving your physician recruitment process

The lifeblood of any developing practice is the new physicians they can bring in, generating more cases and helping keep volume levels at a favorable level. The more physicians you are able to bring in, the faster you can meet your goals for growth and outreach. The practices that do recruitment well are able to grow rapidly, while those who do not, are unable to thrive. Below are five key concepts that can help make your recruitment efforts easier and more likely to land high quality candidates for your practice.

1.) Get your physician team involved from the beginning

The best sales people you have for your practice are not limited to just your medical director or your recruiting coordinator. Putting potential candidates in touch with members of your physician group who may not yet be partners helps put them at ease, and can also help highlight chemistry issues that wouldn’t be apparent initially. It is important to stress a connection between your junior physicians and the candidates, to help show them that it is possible to be successful and the path that your contract articulates is real and achievable. Speaking with someone who is actively going through the process from employee to partner, or who has recently completed it, can be a huge asset in convincing candidates that your opportunity is the right one for them.

2.) Your practice is more than your physicians

The primary concerns for most new candidates coming out of fellowship are "where am I going to be working, and how much am I being paid to work there?" As information regarding contracting and salaries becomes easier to obtain, flattening the competitive market for similar candidates, it becomes increasingly important to distinguish your practice from others in less obvious ways. Focus on getting your physician's families involved, wives especially. Make sure that your staff knows and understands the culture of your practice and clinical philosophies, and that they are reinforcing that message through the visit. Recruit the whole family, not just the candidate, and be sure to make a personal connection outside of the walls of your clinic. Show that your practice is more than a few lead doctors, and both your staff and new physicians will take note.

3.) Target candidates with ties to the area

Location is always important, but not every practice can be located in Chicago, Los Angeles or Scottsdale. As a result, you can increase your chances of successful recruitment by targeting physicians who have ties to your specific geographic location. Chances are if they went to High School or College near your facility, there is likely family or friends still in the area. Perhaps more importantly, you can focus on the facility and the clinical team if they are already familiar with the area, allowing you to do what you do best: sell your practice. On a larger scale, prioritize candidates with regional ties, as physicians familiar with the Midwest are more likely to move or remain there than someone from the West Coast. Think about how you would describe your community geographically and demographically, and then focus on those candidates that come from similar backgrounds.

4.) Use an intermediary for negotiations

Sometimes negotiations can become very personal, for both the candidates and the physician partners in your group. It is one thing to talk nostalgically about how easy it was to find physicians in the past, but today's contracting process can be much more drawn out, with salary, vacation time and benefits top concerns. An added disadvantage to the ease of finding information about initial salaries is that new fellows know exactly how much they are worth, and know if your contract is far off of industry standard. It helps to remove your physician team from the negotiations directly for two reasons, first, it reduces the chance of things becoming personal, and letting tempers and egos ruin an otherwise reasonable deal, and secondly it allows you to frame the discussions in a positive light, calming fears and helping make sure that the process is approached in a calm and clear-headed manner. Continually stress to your physicians the need to be "deal-makers" instead of focusing on the negative.

5.) Do not let your team be discouraged by declines

No practice is going to secure every candidate they pursue, and there are inevitably going to be some physicians that your leadership team likes that end up going elsewhere. It is important that you do not let these failed attempts to find new physicians ruin the next recruitment process. Each candidate should be weighed on their own merits, and each negotiation should be handled in a vacuum, separate from other attempts. It is important to make clear that comments about past candidates and negotiations are counter-productive, and going into the next interview process with a sour taste from the last one is a good way to scare good candidates away from the beginning. Learn from the success and failures of previous recruitment efforts, keep them in mind moving forward, but make sure that each candidate is given a fair chance to impress your physicians and your clinical staff.

For all of your recruitment and staffing needs, please contact DECA Health @ 1-866-908-3514